

It's "Whatever you are Gay, Straight whatever..." Stereotyped from the outside: An exploration of women footballers' gender barriers and experiences.

Sullivan, B¹

¹*School of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Lincoln, United Kingdom*

Women can be empowered by playing historically masculine sports, but can also encounter criticism and marginalisation if gender boundaries are challenged. The principal aim of the present study was to examine the lived experiences of 18-22 year old women football players from a University in the East of England. The study adopted a Bourdieusian framework to examine how participants contested and negotiated gendered practices within their sport. The ways in which participants adopted symbolic and cultural practices were investigated. Ethical approval was granted by a University ethics Committee. 6 participants were recruited using opportunistic sampling. Study methods triangulated non-participant ethnographic observations, semi-structured group interviews comprising of 6 individuals and 4 individual interviews. Field notes and interview data were transcribed and thematically analysed using axial coding. Findings from the study demonstrated many participants started off in 'boys' teams, and several participants reproduced the notion of male superiority in football by adopting 'masculine' practices and describing how early mixed-gender experiences had made them more 'physical' players. Several participants described how they had felt empowered through these experiences, for example by winning awards. Conversely, a number of participants described abuse and resistance to their participation, suggesting that the gendered football habitus was contested and problematic for others in the field of football. The study highlights important issues regarding women's early socialisation into football. Further research is required to examine how early experiences influence present perceptions of the gendering of women's football.